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ABSTRACT

Students and teachers need to discuss authorial intent to understand some literary works on their own terms--this is particularly true in the case of Carson McCullers. McCullers' works can be understood as having a rich foundation of authorial intent based on the writer's central experience, as a Southern woman, of gender. The central importance of female adolescence in her work cannot be overstated; it lies at the heart of her two best known novels, "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter" and "A Member of the Wedding," and of many of her short stories. Appreciation of McCullers' work requires a perspective and set of concerns that were largely inaccessible to the working critic prior to the development of feminist criticism. A fair appraisal of earlier critics of her work involves the recognition of specific traditions within literary criticism. A fair appraisal of McCullers' work might also involve the admission that the creative woman must find ways to keep alive the adolescent with whom her adult consciousness begins. A useful response to student inquiry regarding authorial intent needs to acknowledge the possibility of readings that approach a text more nearly on its own terms than is sometimes thought to be allowed. (Seventeen notes are included; 25 references are attached.) (RS)

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Acts of Appropriation:

Gender and Creativity in the Fiction of Carson McCullers

Phebe Davidson

Recently, a student (male) in one of my classes prefaced a question about a twentieth-century novel by an American writer (female) with "I know you can't talk about authorial intent, but. . ." and I found myself confronting what all too often seems to be the brick wall of critical/theoretical and even pedagogical doctrine[1] as I wondered why I (or anyone else) couldn't (or shouldn't) talk about authorial intent. At the time, the rather facile response I offered my student was "Let's not let that stop us."

In retrospect, that response strikes me as not only facile, but flippant; yet I believe it approached an issue that deserves serious attention. Most particularly, I wonder if it might not absolutely necessary to talk about authorial intent in some instances,[2] and whether this particular student might not, in

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[1]. I conflate pedagogical, theoretical, and critical positions here simply because most college English instructors are trained as critics or theorists, and thus have tended to institutionalize critical practice in their teaching.

[2]According to James Barscz, "What goes on inside of a writer, what his experience is. . .or even what a writer is 'trying to say,' is all perfectly invisible to us. All we have to go on is what he does say, his chosen 'behavior,' the pose he assumes, the words he puts on the page." (1) While Barscz is theorizing specifically about problems in teaching composition, his method of moving "into the real of conscious choice elements of behavior that were previously unexamined or assumed to be necessary, natural, or given," (1) makes of the "words he puts upon the page" a means of access to the intent of a writer--

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fact, need to talk about it if he was to locate a certain kind of coherence in the text. At the same time, it occurred to me that some writers, if their work is to be understood on anything like its own terms, might well need to be discussed in terms of authorial intent--at least insofar as a reader, intelligently engaging the text, can construct that intent.

Somehow, my student's ability to question and explore literary texts in particular, potentially illuminating ways had been appropriated, if not by the academy then surely by one or more of its members, and in consequence the student's vision was more tightly circumscribed than it needed to be. At the same time, the writer in question--Carson McCullers--whose work can be understood as having a rich foundation of authorial intent based in the writer's experience, was being denied a manner of reading that revealed significant ramifications to her work.

Certainly, the student and the writer were not alone in the dilemma. Once the student had begun his question, the entire class and teacher were with them as well. And so were the critics--many of whom had appropriated McCullers' texts as they honed their own critical techniques, and all of whom were writers (as I am) with intentions of their own--some acknowledged and some not.

Part of the problem in talking about McCullers was that the

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student or otherwise--by examination of the literary choices (of tone, diction, character, dramatic situation) that the writer has made.

critics in question--those who were publishing on McCullers' fiction from 1940 to 1983--were not prepared to read McCullers in the same fashion as those who were publishing after the 1985 publication of Louise Westling's Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens--the first book of criticism to offer an approach to the McCullers canon that focused on the centrality (and difficulty) of the writer's experience, as a Southern woman, of gender. Appreciation of McCullers' work requires, I believe, a perspective and set of concerns that were largely inaccessible to the working critic prior to the development of feminist criticism.[3] Carson McCullers was, after all, a woman writer. Further, she was concerned almost exclusively with problems of female identity as it related to creativity--with what she perceived as the virtual impossibility for a conventional woman of achieving the sort of creative fulfillment ascribed to the artist.[4] To this end she returned in story after story, book after book, to the same figure--the female adolescent.

The central importance of female adolescence in the work of

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[3]By feminist criticism, I mean that body of critical practice that, to borrow the words of Annette Kolodny, has "involved exposing the sexual stereotyping of women in both our literature and our literary criticism and, as well, demonstrating the inadequacy of established critical schools and methods to deal or sensitively with works written by women." ("Minefield," 144)

[4]Or, as Susan Gubar puts it, "if the creator is a man, the creation itself is the female, who, like Pygmalion's ivory girl, has no name or identity or voice of her own." (292) In other words, the woman is perceived within the larger culture as object rather than subject; artifact rather than artist.

Carson McCullers can hardly be overstated. When a writer addresses her subject through the repeated use of the same figure, common sense dictates a recognition of authorial intent. Yet the existing body of critical work on Carson McCullers prior to 1985 largely ignores the central position in her writing of the female adolescent, with its inherent challenge to socially accepted gender roles.* The tendency has been, for the most part, to treat this figure as symbolic of the more general human condition of isolation (particularly as it exists for the artist, who is traditionally, like Pygmalion, male) rather than as a key to McCullers' understanding of the nature of creativity as a phenomenon that had been socially constructed as a masculine attribute. Men could be creative; women could not. Girls, however, until they achieved the dubious haven of adult womanhood, could have artistic impulses and even some talent--could play at creativity until they adjusted to the attitudes and responsibilities their society so rigidly insisted upon in its women.

The female adolescent lies at the heart of McCullers' two

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*For the feminist critic, there is a crucial awareness that literature is "a social institution, embedded not only within its own literary traditions but also within the particular physical and mental artifacts of the society from which it comes." ("Minefield," 147) This concern, united with the belief promulgated by Lillian Robinson in "Criticism--and Self-Criticism" that art is not created in a disembodied cerebral process, but in the matching of symbolic constructs with the experience of corresponding states and constructs in the real world.

best known novels, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter and A Member of the Wedding. Accounts of the female adolescent also figure with startling clarity in a number of the short stories. Even such works as Reflections in a Golden Eye and Clock Without Hands, which ostensibly deal with the male provinces of jurisprudence and army life, hinge in some curious manner on the experience of female adolescence.♠

The continued persistence of the female adolescent as a focal point of Carson McCullers' fiction suggests--if we allow that experience is the basis of fiction--that adolescence was a time of crucial importance to Carson McCullers herself, central alike to her personal identity and to her sense of her own creative power. Appropriately, because of that same creative power, it was a time of life that needed to be defined and

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♠Leonora Penderton in Reflections in a Golden Eye has always in her room the picture of an adolescent girl friend whose name she has forgotten, but without whose picture she feels dislocated. It seems likely, especially since the other fully developed female character, Alison Langdon, dreams hopelessly of returning to her childhood, and remembers with longing the brief free time before her marriage, the Penderton's friend is a metaphor for the self she lost when she reached maturity. Clock Without Hands, written quite late in McCullers' life, turns ultimately on the injustice suffered by a pubescent girl:

> Ossie Little was twenty years older than his wife, a part time preacher who was able to make his Holy Roller congregation talk in strange tongues. . .a shambling no-good tenant who let the farm rot. Trouble started just as soon as he married a child-bride wife whose folks. . .forced their daughter Joy to marry him. . .first playing with dolls, then having a little baby of her own to take and care for when she was not yet thirteen. (181-2)

delineated in such a manner that it could not be avoided by her audience. Thus, should her readers fail to recognize consciously the central importance of the female adolescent experience, they would have become participants in that experience by the mere act of reading the books.[7] In structuring her texts to make this sharing of experience unavoidable,[8] McCullers simultaneously recreated in text her vision of adolescence as she had experienced it and (in the real world) created her adult self--the woman working creatively, but at terrible emotional cost.

As dramatized in McCullers' fiction, adolescence for a girl[9]

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[7]In "Stylizing Contexts," James Barscz argues that the reader's experience of the writer (or writing), that "I experience you as experiencing" makes the very sensible point that not only is reading an experience--it is an area of experience where the boundaries of self are to some extent collapsed by the experience, through text, of the writer's experience. Given the choices McCullers as author has made of figures and situations, it seems only reasonable to allow a measure of intent--of calculated effect.

[8]This is not to say that a reader is necessarily going to discover anything absolutely indisputable about the writer's intent--as Barscz has put it, in his discussion of R.D.Laing, "I cannot avoid trying to understand your experience, because although I do not experience your experience, which is invisible to me (and nontastable, nontouchable, nonsmellable, and inaudible), yet I experience you as experiencing." (Barscz, 1) Thus, while it is possible to experience the text without fully understanding it, the experience of text nonetheless alters the reader's understanding.

[9]As early as 1971 Nancy Chodorow was insisting in "Being and Doing; A Cross-Cultural Examination of the Socialization of Males and Females" that ". . . men are artists, creators, risk their lives have projects. Women, on the other hand, are carefully trained to "be." A girl's natural inclination would also be to "do,: but she learns to make herself into an object, to restrict herself to the sphere of immanence. Female destiny is foreordained and repetitive; men can choose their destiny" (273)-

is a strange and terrifying time fraught with mysterious perils in which artistic creativity plays as important a part as the biologically triggered passage into procreativity more commonly associated with puberty. The female adolescent of McCullers fiction is typically;

1. motherless
2. alienated from her family
3. friendless
4. not in full touch with herself
5. sexually ambivalent (attracted to both sexes)
6. deliberately sexually ambiguous (ambiguously named, defiant of efforts to type her as one sex or the other since absolute identification with either gender violates the fragile core of self)
7. on the brink of realizing artistic creativity.

The theme which emerges with greatest consistency is that a woman can accede to the demands of male-dominated heterosexual society only at the cost of her innately double sexuality and her creative power. An examination of the life and work of Carson McCullers[10] leaves little doubt that much of the sexual

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-a contention born out by the configuration of female socialization in McCullers' fictional universe as her heroines "learn" to make themselves into conventional women.

[10]Oliver Evans' 1966 The Ballad of Carson McCullers, an Intimate Biography, makes no mention of her bi-sexuality--barely acknowledging that sexuality was part of her life. Virginia Carr's exhaustive 1975 biography, which is the first to frankly acknowledge McCullers' bi-sexuality and to explore the problems of the writer's relationship with her mother, makes it pointless not to draw the obvious parallels between the writer's life and her work. Quite obviously, the passage of nine years made it

ambivalence/ambiguity of McCullers' female adolescents is grounded in her own experience of life, that the objectification in text of these figures constitutes a deliberate and rigorous challenge to received understandings of gender roles and creativity, and that for virtually all of her publishing life Carson McCullers continued to issue her challenge to readers and critics alike in her continued, textualized exploration of the adolescent she carried within her.

McCullers' first and most blatantly autobiographical short story, "Wunderkind," written when she was seventeen, deals with a fifteen year old girl, Frances, who like McCullers realizes that she is not an interpretive musical genius: that something, "adolescence, she thought" ("Wunderkind," 36) had taken from her the earlier clarity of her experience of music, leaving her instead "Bach, Debussy, Prokofieff, Brahms -- timed grotesquely to the throb of her tired body. . ." (78) while she is painfully aware of the throbbing of the veins of Mr. Bilderbach, her teacher, and the full pink lower lip which is shining because he bites it. The implication of this intense awareness of his physical presence, which has an aura of sexuality, is that her own dawning sexual awareness, linked inevitably to a measure of gender consciousness, makes art an impossible sphere of concentration. Significantly, the musical talent of her male

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more possible for one writer to discuss sexuality than the other. At the same time, one must question the validity of an "intimate" biography that seems to mis-represent its subject.

counterpart Heime is undiminished--is apparently heightened--by his own experience of puberty. While the pubescent girl suffers through her music lesson, Mrs. Bilderbach bustles irrelevantly in and out of the kitchen, offering food. Taken together, the personae of Mrs. Bilderbach and Heime seem less an admission that testosterone provokes art than a muted, rebellious bewilderment on the part of the girl when her own talent fails. . .a sensation very likely to have been familiar to McCullers, who had trained long years for the concert stage and then been found wanting, but who nevertheless became a writer of considerable strength.

When McCullers began writing at fifteen, she had apparently already relinquished her dream of a musical career as a concert pianist (Carr, 36) while retaining her commitment to writing. If the stories are any indication, her failure as a musician was not entirely compensated by her flowering as a writer. Two other early stories, "Poldi" and "Court in the West Eighties," both written before her 1937 marriage to Reeves McCullers, reveal two young female musicians who are provocatively ambivalent about their art, having chosen it over or substituted it for sex. "Poldi" presents the woman cellist whose dedication to her art allows her to be attracted only to men who are unattainable. In consequence, she abuses the genuine and accessible love offered by a young man named Hags. The female shape of the cello she straddles, and the deliberate manner in which she directs Hags' attention to it as it rests between her spread legs, is

simultaneously cruel and a little desperate. Poldi's sexuality is inextricably bound to her identity as an artist, and however she hungers for love and sexual fulfillment, she must point out to the man the overwhelming importance in her life of her art, and her sexual awareness of her instrument. The story's equation of artistic creativity with female sexuality is unsettling in its repudiation of the more conventional notion that art, for a woman, was more likely to be a pallid substitute for sex than an expression of sex. The writer's persistent repetition of her theme, however, works against that more conventional idea as a viable interpretation of the story.

A related vision of sexuality is offered to the reader by the young woman who is the cellist in "Court in the West Eighties." Here, the narrator is a woman who observes living across the courtyard from her, a red haired man (usually wearing pajamas), a woman cellist, and a young couple expecting their first child.

The red haired man, who prefigures the red haired soldier of Member of the Wedding, has a sexual fascination for the young woman who is the narrator, as does the cellist at work. Here, the narrator/artist is drawn simultaneously in two directions--toward heterosexual involvement with the red haired man and toward the cellist, who seems to radiate a sexual heat, her music "raw toned and lazily played. She seemed to go into a coma when she worked, and her face took on a cowish look." ("Court," 32)

That there is a sexual element to the cellist's performance is fairly clear, and forms the basis of the narrator's fascination with that particular neighbor. Yet the cellist herself has a lover and the noise of the cellist's love affair, set against the jobless starvation of the others, precipitates the dissolution of the small collection of court dwellers. The narrator is left to muse upon "me standing there alone and this man asleep in his room on the other side of the court." (28) This may be, as Louis Rubin and Margaret McDowell (among others) suggest, an emblem of spiritual isolation,[11] but it is at least equally a moment of sexual and creative tension in which the author has juxtaposed the sexual fulfillment of the artist at work with the starvation and sense of futility that haunt the couple awaiting their child (certainly not a promising vision of heterosexual fulfillment) and narrator's (another artist--but not, it seems, fulfilled) disengaged sense of those around her.

This same tension appears in "The Orphanage" when a little girl is told by her "initiator. . . a little girl named Hattie" (48) that kissing a boy turns a girl and any children she has

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[11]Here, the critical vision that insists on a very broad context for interpretation (the artist in the world) precludes the highly specific reading that recognizes the condition of a particular kind of woman as the central issue in the text. By not recognizing the specificity of the female figure in the story, the critic (unwittingly, one hopes) minimalizes the text, identifying it as an inappropriate configuration of characters to deal with the dilemma in the critic's mind. The text has been appropriated, to some extent, in the service of a not entirely appropriate theme.

later colored. Since the narrator has kissed a favored companion, a little boy provocatively named Tit, her anxiety is considerable, and is not at all allayed when she peers with her friend at a "dead pickled baby in a jar." (51) The sexual implications of kissing Tit--which teeter unsettlingly between heterosexual and lesbian impulse--are blended with the images of nurturance, and the implication is that sexual fruition in conventional roles yields nothing more than a dead pickled baby. While it is true that children in an orphanage are unparented--and in consequence perhaps "deadened" in crucial way--the baby in the jar remains resonant with the futile, hungry depression of the young couple from "Court in the West Eighties."

McCullers writes, in "The Orphanage," that "the child knows two layers of reality -- that of the world which is accepted like an immense collusion of all adults, -- and the unacknowledged hidden secret, the profound --." (51) The suggestion that the hidden, secret, profound province of the child encompasses an instinctive understanding of the child's bisexual nature (it is, after all, a girl who kisses Tit) and a wariness of accepted adult heterosexual roles, borders on outright repudiation of those roles.

A similar gesture toward repudiation occurs in "Like That," a story in which a pre-adolescent girl who shares a bed with her sister watches the sister's life change and her personality fragment and harden under the dual pressures of menstruation and

sexual experience with her boyfriend. Ultimately, this girl--who has shared her bed only with another girl--declares her refusal to have either periods or boyfriends if they will make her "like that." The same repudiation is again dramatized by Constance, the narrator of "Breath from the Sky," for whom puberty (the initiation into accepted gender roles) means banishment and exile. Already isolated from her family by the pleurisy which has made her an invalid, (an experience McCullers had as a youngster) she now faces life in a sanitarium. Unable to capture for any length of time the attention of her mother, she finally prevails upon the mother to cut her long dirty hair with the garden shears.

The coincidence of Constance's illness with her adolescence amplifies the meaning of both conditions, since her dirty stringy hair and cursorily sponge bathed body now become signs not of illness, merely, but of puberty, a time when the body becomes dirty and impure and the hair a symbol of sexual power. Significantly, Constance refuses to let her sister even touch the hair, as if it might in some way contaminate the other girl. The rich irony of a maternal figure using shears intended to prune and promote new growth to sever the symbol of her daughter's coming of age is vital to the story, making of Constance the first of many "stript and shorne" heroines in McCullers' fiction. It is tempting to speculate that fact McCullers' identity as a Southern writer, like other facets of her life, has deep

connections with what happens in her fiction.

In writing of the ways in which men imaged the Southern landscape, Annette Kolodny quotes an early manuscript which says of the land, "Twice she hath been stript, shorne, and made deformed." (68) by the inhabitants who are in some sense her children. In a very like sense, the young women of McCullers' fiction are the children of their own bodies, which are the wombs out of which their adult characters are born, and which they necessarily disfigure in their doomed efforts to create for themselves viable identities. Frankie Addams and Mick Kelly, with their boyish names and their extremely short hair, offer obvious examples. The adolescent's doomed effort to sculpt a satisfyingly passionate and intense identity from the accepted definition of woman's role gains in poignancy if the woman is also an artist.

The issue of the adolescent in McCullers' work is not easily resolved. While the pubescent girl is clearly a central, and important figure, there is little in the critical canon to indicate just how she is to be understood. While Patricia Meyer Spacks seems a bit wide of the mark when she dismisses The Heart is a Lonely Hunter as "awfully sentimental," and when she fails even to mention Member of the Wedding[12], her comments on female

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[12]It seems probable, given The Female Imagination's 1972 publication date, that Spacks was operating (almost certainly unconsciously) on a long-honored idea of what texts were "important" or "valuable" or "significant"--in short, on what works deserved a place in the literary canon. Even as she worked

adolescence as a condition are illuminating. "The self," she writes, "can dwell in infancy, but others represent inevadeable reality." By extension, as the individual grows out of infancy, the self becomes more and more vulnerable, no longer insulated from the reality of other lives. (200) All McCullers' adolescents lack, as Spacks writes of female adolescents in general, "a sense of their own free will, of full participation in the human franchise. They learn to know that their suffering derives from gender, rather than common humanity." (201)

The theme of spiritual isolation, which is indeed an essential part of McCullers' work, is not itself sufficient to explain the poignant recurrence of her disturbing adolescent heroines. In McCullers work, the issue of spiritual isolation derives its greatest significance from the fact that it is so consistently expressed in terms of female adolescence. Thus, spiritual isolation becomes to critic Elinor Wikborg the drama of "escaping the confines of the self, the limitations of one's own particular experience of life." (21) The emphasis is mine. The particularity which most concerns McCullers is both female and adolescent. The isolation and desperation of McCullers' girls on the edge of womanhood are so intense because, again in Spacks' words, of "their gender, rather than common humanity." The

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to overturn accepted strictures of canonicity, she was unable to escape them entirely. Like my student, her own critical approach to literature had to some extent been appropriated by the academy or its members.

experience of Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams is illustrative; both are defined by gender and by heterosexually defined gender roles. It is worth noting that both Mick (with her uncontrollable cowlicks) and Frankie (with her crew cut) are heroines "stript and shorne."

It is a little surprising that Margaret McDowell, who recognizes that Mick Kelly is the most fully developed of the three main characters in Lonely Hunter insists that the book's theme is the "mind's compulsion to revolt against enforced isolation, to express the self at all costs " (31) and fails to note that the theme's expression hinges on the futility of that compulsion for an adolescent girl. Similarly, I.H. Hassan's insistence that the book is a kind of "ugly joke" (24) and that the book's spirit shudders at the strangled south" (2) seems (at least to me, reading in the 90's) to be a nearly deliberate refusal to look at the less public and more specific issues of gender and adolescence, to subsume these overwhelming concerns of Carson McCullers in the more conventionally received notions of appropriate literary themes.

Like most of McCullers' girls, Mick Kelly is a sort of orphan, deprived of her mother's attention by the fact that her mother is simply too busy, too consumed by the demands of a large family, ailing husband, and economic necessity to relate well to any of her children well. Mick's father, a watchmaker like the author's own father, is unemployed, hanging like a wraith about

the house he will later lose. In consequence, the twelve year old Mick is responsible for much of the care of the youngest Kelly child, Bubber. In self-defense, Mick, who is described as looking at first glance "like a very young boy" (14) lives on the two levels defined by Spacks. What Mick thinks of as her "inside room" is her home as woman and artist, and her "outside room" the public part of herself. For Mick, life in the inside room is problematic. Female initiations in the book are closed to the unmothered,[13] and when Mick tries to create her own rite of passage (her first prom party), her gathering crashed by neighborhood youngsters and degenerates into a wild session of play. Her first experience of sex "merely baffles her with its brevity" (McDowell, 39) and for the boy is apparently disastrous, since he immediately leaves town for good.

The book depicts male sexuality and male vision as spiritual dead ends. Lancy Davis, the adolescent, highly sexed, black writer of essays has attempted self-emasculation. Jake Blount, the white would-be revolutionary, has driven a nail through his own hand to emulate Christ. The black Dr. Copeland can perceive

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[13]Nancy Chodorow, in "The Reproduction of Mothering," explains that "Women's mothering perpetuates itself through social-structurally induced psychological mechanisms. It is not an unmediated product of physiology." (505) The consequences for Mick Kelly of this fact are monumental--she is barred by her mother's distraction from entry into the community of women as wives and mothers (the goal of the "traditional" feminine upbringing). At the same time, Mick must serve as her mother's substitute within the family, entering yet another area of peril since "Daughters may become substitutes for mothers, and develop insufficiently individuated senses of self." (Chodorow, 505)

nothing beyond the misfortune of his own race, a condition that overwhelms him. In counterpoint, his daughter Portia understands the misfortune of all humanity, as exemplified by her sympathy for her poverty stricken white employer. Mick's father cannot support his family, and her friend Biff Brannon, always reproached on some level by his own impotence,[14] has a wife who dies of a tumor "nearly the size of an unborn child." (95) For both women, the mother of too many children and the wife of the impotent but sensitive man, marriage is a confining and even fatal (emotionally for one, physically for the other) condition--a condition Mick, not surprisingly, wants to avoid.

As an artist, Mick knows that music is her raison d'etre, but she is always prevented by circumstance (and circumstance always colored by gender) from becoming a musician. Her attempt to make a violin is a humiliating failure; her wish to sing from the rooftops is thwarted by the crying of her brother, Ralph. When economic necessity finally forces Mick Kelly to leave school (and the piano in the gym) for a job at the five and dime, she has been evicted irrevocably from her inside room. She realizes that had she been a male, she could have had a part time job which would have left her time to practice, but that such jobs were closed to girls. The earrings she wears to work, emblematic

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[14]It is probably worth mentioning that Biff's literal impotence is in large measure a double for the economic and emotional impotence of Mr. Kelly, who is unable to give his family or his passionate daughter the support they need.

of her sexual maturity, pinch her ears, an organic part of the Mick who loved music with such singleminded passion.

A similar defeat overtakes Frankie Addams in A Member of the Wedding, which McCullers herself called a "monstrous story." (Evans, 100) Whether the novel is a "teenaged version of existential dread"[18] (Cook, 63) or a narrative of "Frankie's difficulties in formulating herself" (Wikborg, 31) the book remains emphatically Frankie's story.

Frankie, whose mother died at her birth (111) has recently been ousted from her father's bed because she is so big. Because of her height, she feels like a freak. Her height, her crew cut, and her fascination with the half-man, half-woman at the local freak show suggest her sexual ambiguity, as does her fantasy world in which people could "instantly change back and forth from boys to girls." (118) Suspended between childhood and adulthood, Frankie must deal with her own sexuality and her overwhelming loneliness in world where she can only feel "everything just walked off and left me." (37)

She first seeks to connect herself by means of blood, attempting to donate a quart a week, and thus become part of those people into whom her blood is transfused. She is rejected as a donor because of her age, but there is a discomfiting

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[18]In Cook's choice of words, the effect of the word "teenaged" is to trivialize the effect of the novel--to deny it adult status, and hence, serious consideration. In Wikborg's choice of words, the implication is that the successful formulation of the adult self is Frankie's real achievement.

subliminal feeling that it is her capacity to menstruate that is really the problem. Also suggestive of menstruation is the name of the Blue Moon Cafe, where she meets a red haired soldier who at first seems nice but then tries to rape her. Not surprisingly, her father's store (or perhaps his story) was not on the same street" (77) as the cafe, being situated in a nicer neighborhood. Since Frankie approached the Blue Moon with a sort of nervous good hope, the near rape is a particularly nasty part of the disillusionment of Frankie Addams.

In her search for connection, Frankie falls deeply in love with the idea of her brother's wedding, of which she wants to be a continuing part, married herself neither to the bride nor the groom, nor existing as their child, but simply accepted into their configuration of human relationship--creating what she thinks of as a "we of me" relationship. Thus, she attempts to deal with the demands of society without succumbing to them, and like the visit to the Blue Moon, the attempt is a failure. Along the way to this final disillusionment, she has learned that Big Mama, the local fortune teller, sees what is happening only with the aid of mirrors (158) and has been told by Berenice Sadie Brown, who married at 13, that marriage "certainy do" (32) stop one's growth. She has come to terms with the "nasty lies" about married people and what they do that she has heard from older girls. The split vision of Berenice (one natural eye, one of glass -- another metaphor perhaps for the inside and outside

rooms) reflects the dichotomy of vision imposed on a woman in the stunting confinement of accepted heterosexual relationships.

Ultimately, Frankie becomes Frances and relinquishes her hope of a "we of me" relationship. At the book's close, she has become shallow, flirtatious, and approximately what adults expect her to be. All of the deep psychic potential of Frankie Addams, all the passion and the urgency, have been sacrificed to glossy surface of Frances.

While the adolescent heroines of Carson McCullers are not, properly speaking, McCullers herself, they are her specific conduit to energy and expression. People who knew McCullers at fifteen and sixteen all agree on "her amazing creative energy, which overflowed in all directions." (Evans, 26) The power of her work, where it deals with such figures, is unmistakable--if it does not always win advocates, it deeply moves a reader in some fashion. When Joseph Frank reviewed A Member of the Wedding for the Sewanee Review in 1946, he was so appalled by the novel and its heroine that he characterized the book as "morbid and perverse"[16] and Frankie Addams as "not exactly anyone's idea of

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[16]Mr. Frank's response to McCullers' novel is strikingly reminiscent of the lines penned by Atlantic editor H.E. Scudder, when he read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper.

> "Dear Madam,
> Mr. Howells has handed me this story.
> I could not forgive myself if I made others as
> miserable as I have made myself!" (cited in Hedges, 40)

Both men, it would seem, were sufficiently uncomfortable with the material chosen by these two women writers--both of whom were

an average American girl, even in adolescence." (Evans, 119) His transparent aversion to this sensitive adolescent forces him to miss the point that the American girl "even in adolescence" was denied the right to an identity other than one defined by a society dominated by men who probably felt much the same way that Mr. Frank did.

McCullers, however, sees in adolescence the germinal material of greatness, and Lawrence Graver's statement that the book is "a small but undeniably affecting story of adolescent joy and frustration" (41) seems today to be a gratuitous minimalization of the book, one which casually ignores the tragedy of Frankie's collapse into "typical" female adolescent behavior at the novel's close. In a similar vein, Dale Edmonds' feeling that Frankie's experiences "contribute to her eventual maturity" (20) is blood chilling in it insensitivity to the confining quality of such a maturity. Frankie's fascination with the freak show's half-man, half-woman, I would argue, is not a passing adolescent aberration, but an inherent part of the female condition with its split vision, its two rooms, that first makes itself felt in adolescence. Whenever I read Louis Rubin's judgment of McCullers' fiction that "if you like the experience of fiction to be complex and subtle, she is not for you," (270) it seems to me embarrassingly clear that his grasp of subtlety is

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concerned with the suppression of woman's artistic creativity--that they could not, in a very real sense, read the work at all.

limited to the subtleties of masculine (or masculinized) logic, and that the subtleties of accommodation by young women to ways of the world are things he simply does not--or perhaps cannot--understand.

A fairer appraisal of McCullers' work might involve the admission that the creative woman, if she is to do the work it is in her to do, must find ways to keep alive the adolescent with whom her adult consciousness begins, to resist the pressures to immure her in the roles attached to earrings and high heels, and that in the literature of the American South, Carson McCullers stands among her foremost champions. A fairer appraisal of the earlier critics of her work, similarly, might involve the recognition of specific traditions within literary criticism,[17]

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[17]Part of this tradition, inescapably, is the nature of the literary canon as it was experienced by Rubin and his contemporaries. Presumably, they viewed the established canon as the bulwark of taste and standards of craftsmanship, never dreaming that it might have other political implications. In "Treason our Text," Lillian Robinson explicates the canon in a rather different light.

> As with may other restrictive institutions, we are hardly aware of it until we come into conflict with it; the elements of the literary canon are simply absorbed by the apprentice scholar and critic. . .without anyone's ever seeming to inculcate or defend them. Appeal, were any necessary, would be to the other meaning of "canon," that is, to established standards of judgment and of taste. . . . Sweeping modifications in the canon are said to occur because of changes in collective sensibility, but individual admissions and elevations from "minor" to "major" status tend to be achieved by successful critical promotion, which is to say, demonstration that a particular author does meet generally accepted criteria of excellence. (105)

and with the concerns of such touted modern writers as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, neither of whom was much worried by the position in society of female adolescents or the women they would become. A perhaps fairer, and certainly more useful response to student inquiry, would need to acknowledge the practical limits of critical and theoretical mandates--to acknowledge the possibility of readings that approach a text more nearly on its own terms than is sometimes thought to be allowed.

Robinson continues, citing "the apparently systematic neglect of women's experience within the literary canon" (106) as one of the chief concerns of feminist critics. It is this particular aspect of canonicity--its peremptory exclusion on the aesthetic ground of excellence--of material that is very probably as valuable as that which is included, but very different from the inclusions in point of view and subject matter, that seems to have caused such widely dismissive reading of McCullers' fiction.

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